

OPINION

The arsonists of the moment need not win

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Ulster Covenant 100th Anniversary Parade to Stormont Estate in Belfast, 2012. Roger Bradley/iStock images.

Now we're sucking diesel. It is a Northern Irish expression, properly at home in the counties beyond the city, though it was a Belfast show, Line of Duty, that carried it to the world, Adrian Dunbar delivering it with that particular Fermanagh grin that tells you the engine has caught, the thing is moving, we are getting somewhere. I have come to love it because it captures something I have spent years trying to say about Belfast, and about an arc in my own life I did not see coming.

But this story does not begin in Belfast. It begins with an eight-millimetre film.

Among the happiest of the films we watched in the basement on rainy days of my 1970s childhood, there is one I return to more than any other. A mid-July day, 1962. Christina Street in Sarnia, in southwestern Ontario. Bright colour, almost shockingly bright, marching bands, a sea of orange. By the 1970s the footage had the quality of jerky newsreel, already feeling like history. We did not know who was marching, or why, or what the orange meant. Eight-millimetre film carried no sound, so what we saw was pure spectacle: colour, motion, the formal geometry of a procession. No drums. No flutes. No words from the touchline. We knew only that it was a parade, that our father had filmed it, and that it was beautiful. I have thought a great deal lately about what a recording machine chooses to carry. Belfast knows the question in its bones. The poet Ciaran Carson once wrote of the shipyard riots in the confetti of nuts, bolts and nails, the shrapnel of an industrial city turned on itself. A recording can hold the parade or the riot, the bolt or, in our own time, the bot. The film in the basement held the parade.

It was the Glorious Twelfth.

What the Twelfth means in its homeland needs no rehearsal here. What is less remembered is how far it travelled. The Orange Lodges marched wherever the Ulster diaspora planted itself: Glasgow, Liverpool, Toronto, Sarnia. Toronto in its early decades was called the Belfast of North America. Distance had not diluted the tradition but concentrated it. For Catholics it was not a celebration. It was a reminder. Of who won. Of who lost. Of the line.

I am a committed Catholic. I say this not to draw a line but to acknowledge one, because the whole point of what follows is that the line can be crossed without abandoning who you are. A Catholic writing with warmth about that tradition must be honest about what it cost: not in Sarnia, where something in the new country held the worst of it in check, but in Belfast and Derry and a hundred streets where the Twelfth was not spectacle but siege, where the same tradition that produced decent men in the diaspora had also produced petrol bombs and a generation lost to sectarian murder. The essay that did not acknowledge it would be dishonest. Nor is that honesty safely past tense. This June, in the terraces below the shipyard cranes, masked young men revived the oldest technique of the Troubles, the putting out of families, aimed no longer across the confessional line but at the newest arrivals. The line had not been erased. It had been redrawn.

Sarnia in those years was a Protestant town. Deeply, structurally Protestant. Postwar immigration was changing that, slowly, the way water changes stone: Italians, Poles, others from Catholic Europe arriving in the Chemical Valley. The police were heavily Scots-Irish, Ulster to the bone, and if they saw young Italians gathered in groups of more than two, the instruction was immediate: break it up lads, keep it moving. That, too, was Christina Street.



Two of the drums that paced the Toronto Orangemen marchers on July 12, 1958.

Unknown/The Globe and Mail

Our father, Egidio, born in the Venetian terraferma, raised in the borderlands where Italy blurs into something older, was the man behind the Kodak Brownie. He had been a boy of 11 when the Allies liberated the western Friuli, and the children subsequently liberated a few motorcycles from the British 6th Armoured Division, reassembling them with the urgency of people who needed machines to work. The Brits were not amused. Already he knew that anything built by human hands could be taken apart, understood, and made to work. The conviction carried him to Canada in 1953, where he became a boilermaker by trade and a technologist by instinct.

Egidio was 28 that July afternoon, nine years into Canadian life, a man who understood exactly what he was pointing his camera at. He knew that a Catholic with an Italian name and a rolling Adriatic accent was not the Order's idea of the right sort. He knew the geography of Sarnia's confessional life the way a boilermaker knows a pipe network: which lines carried pressure, which valves were closed, which joints would hold. And yet what he chose to see was ceremony, colour, a free country expressing itself on a summer afternoon. That was not ignorance. It was a decision. A grown man, in full possession of the facts, choosing to find in the spectacle something its participants might

not have offered him, and so seeing it more honestly than anyone who knew what they were looking at.

What he also captured was the other truth. The Northern Irish in Sarnia were decent. They worked hard. They kept their word. There were hard men among the Ulstermen, and on the soccer pitches the language from the touchline suggested certain spectators did not fully appreciate the Successor of Peter. But something restrained them, most of the time. Across the confessional line that nobody talked about and everybody understood, the people of Norn Iron conducted themselves in a way Egidio respected until the day he died. And on Christina Street, where the police told young Italians to keep moving, the virtues won.

Not perfectly. Not completely. But enough.

That word matters. Not triumph. Not resolution. Enough.

We lived on Exmouth Street, a name that carries the Atlantic in its syllables, Devon to Ontario. I went to St. Pat's, home of the Fighting Irish. Not once did any of us think: Hang on, I'm actually Polish, or Italian. We were the Fighting Irish and we were Polish and Italian and whatever, and we saw no contradiction.

It was on these streets that I came to know one family, special in ways I can only partly explain. Their parents had come from Norn Iron. Among their children was a brother who was talented, not golden but something quieter and more durable, who became a lawyer and built a life of real substance. A hopeful traveller, to borrow from Bruce Cockburn, whose family motto has haunted me since I first encountered it: *Accendit Cantu*.

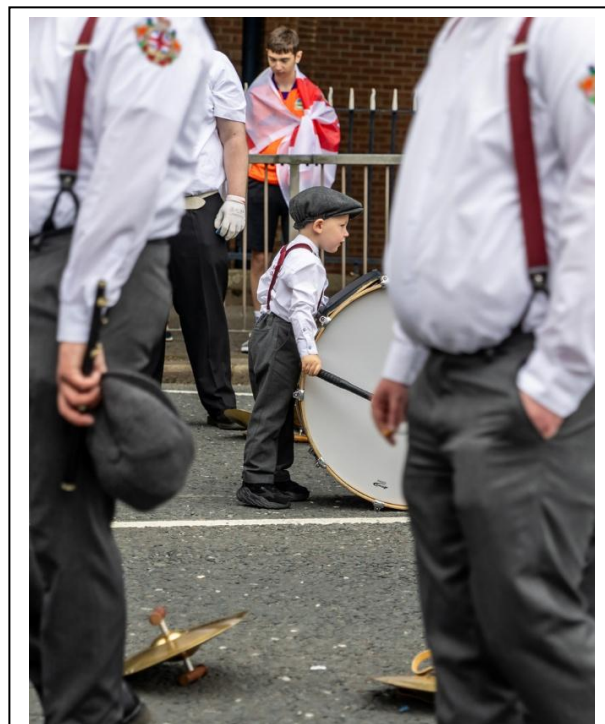
They were Catholic, like us. They were witnesses to something, as I was: that the brokenness of the old country, carried across the ocean, meeting the brokenness of the new land's own arrangements, could be overcome. Not erased. Overcome. There is a difference, and it matters.

That is the argument of this essay: reconciliation is not betrayal. To cross the line without abandoning who you are is not compromise. It is the harder act of faith. The easier thing, the thing tribalism always offers, is clarity. The harder thing is to carry your full inheritance, Catholic, Friulano, Canadian, whatever the accident of origin has made you,

into genuine contact with the other, and to discover that the contact does not dissolve you. It confirms you.

Years later I found myself working for Bud Cullen, Sarnia's own contribution to the federal cabinet, one of Pierre Elliott Trudeau's MPs. I should be honest: I was 16, president of the local Young Liberals, and I cleaned his office, emptying ashtrays mostly, which in the 1980s was practically an industrial operation. But he did not treat me as someone beneath conversation.

On his desk sat a coat of arms bearing the Red Hand of Ulster. Lámh Dhearg, an open right hand, palm forward, red. Its origin is myth: two chieftains racing by boat to claim a kingdom, and one, seeing he would lose, cut off his own hand and hurled it onto the shore ahead of his rival, and so won. The Red Hand has been claimed by Loyalists and Republicans alike, which is either the problem or the point. In its most composed and heraldic form, it sits at the centre of the coat of arms of Queen's University Belfast.



Shankill Sons of Ulster Flute Band marching at the annual Twelfth of July Parade (Orangemen's Day) in Belfast 2024. *Scott Heaney/iStock*

In conversation, Bud returned to the CYO, the Catholic Youth Organization, and what it had meant to him in a mining town in Northern Ontario: proof that the divide could be bridged, that children playing basketball in a church basement learn something the catechism never would.

I was 16. I did not ask him about any of it. I wish I had. I did not know then that Belfast was already in the room, that the coat of arms was less a curiosity than a compass, pointing toward a city whose stubborn, hard-won decency I had always, somehow, been moving toward.

I have looked at the crest of Queen's University Belfast a thousand times since 2018, when the Long Run Institute found its

academic home at QUB. Every time I see it, I see that coat of arms on a desk in Sarnia. The severed hand, hurled across the water, claiming the shore.

What we built there was a bet: that a university in a city the world had filed under “trouble” could take the past seriously as an instrument of the future. I am now Honorary Professor of Practice there, with work ahead on what happens when you set the machine’s capacity alongside the long human record of judgment and error.

There are many voices now telling us how doomed we are. Some are right to be alarmed. But Belfast offers a rebuke, and not a naïve one, for God knows Belfast cannot afford sentimentality about the difficulty of human coexistence. The proof, if proof were wanted, arrived this June: houses burnt on streets freshly painted red, white and blue for the Twelfth, families carried to safety beneath the waiting bunting. Yet the same week produced the other Belfast: those standing in the drizzle to call the thing by its true name, neighbours out with brushes the next morning.

The rebuke holds precisely because it was never a claim of innocence. In 1908, on the Plains of Abraham where Wolfe fell and Montcalm was mortally wounded, the founders of the Quebec Tercentenary planned a colossal monument they called the Angel of Peace. The statue was never built, leaving its intended terrace empty above the river – a promise of reconciliation the country could not physically realize. What Belfast demonstrates, with the stubborn patience of people who have no illusions left to lose, is that you do not need to physically construct the monument to honour the intention.

You are never too old to see new horizons. Egidio knew that. The people of Belfast taught me.

The Belfast–Toronto connection runs deeper than the Long Run Institute. It runs back to that afternoon in 1962, where Egidio pointed his Kodak Brownie at an Orange parade and chose, with full knowledge, to see it as beautiful. That choice was the beginning of something his son would spend a lifetime trying to understand.

Accendit Cantu. He kindles with song. But the motto cuts deeper, for it is also a battle cry. There are two fires, and this June Belfast was reminded of the difference: the fire that gathers a street and the fire that consumes one, the bonfire and the burnt-out terrace. Every generation chooses between them, and no choice is final. What is history, at its best, but the discipline of that choice: a way of carrying the flame so that it illuminates without consuming, and a cry, a song, that says we were here, and it mattered, and we are not done?

Egidio made his choice on a July afternoon in 1962, pointing a small camera at a parade that did not want him, and finding it beautiful. The machines have grown louder since. The camera that mattered this June was a telephone, and the film it carried, a knife attack on a Belfast street, was abroad in the world within the hour, not silent now but amplified to millions and set deliberately alight. Same impulse to record. Opposite use. The bolts have become bots, and a recording can still hold the parade or the riot. Belfast makes the older choice now, street by street, against the arsonists of the moment. The arc is long, and improbable, and unfinished. It is also mine.